

Investigating Science, Spotting Tobacco Tactics

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Investigative reporting is hard, time-consuming tedious work, but is vital to a healthy democracy.

Investigative reporting requires a higher burden of proof

Investigative reporting, at its core, uncovers something of public interest that subjects want hidden. Investigative Reporters and Editors defines investigative reporting as “reporting, through one’s own initiative and work product, matters of importance to readers, viewers or listeners. In many cases, the subjects of the reporting wish the matters under scrutiny to remain undisclosed.”

Revealing information that people want hidden requires rock-solid evidence, ideally from multiple sources, because you can ruin careers and even lives. The higher stakes require extra skepticism, constant questioning of assumptions, reporting against your biases and pursuing every lead to avoid arriving at false conclusions. It often requires protecting confidential sources (eg, using secure email, texting).

Expect blowback. Develop a thick skin. Be willing to piss people off. Bulletproofing your story will help protect you from blowback from vindictive subjects and help shield you from legal liability (see more on this below). Come up with a fact-checking system that can prove how you know what you’re reporting. Try to anticipate objections or attacks, and address them in the story.

Start with a focused question

Just like a topic is not a story, an investigation shouldn’t be a fishing expedition. Do enough preliminary reporting to ensure it’s worth your time and effort to pursue. An investigative story might start with a tip, lingering questions from other stories, public records or your own curiosity. Flesh out leads by tracking down meeting notes, documents, court records, sources, transcripts—whatever you can find that might illuminate the story you think you have. Is there data that can quantify the problem and move your story from anecdote to trend? Formulate a clear question, or working hypothesis, that you can test and guide your reporting.

Examples: Are tobacco companies casting doubt on evidence of vaping’s harms? Did EPA violate the Civil Rights Act by funding state pesticide programs that allow Latino schoolkids to suffer disparate exposures to pesticides? Is California failing to protect its psychiatric hospital staff from unchecked violence?

Figure out what material you need to test your hypothesis and working assumptions (people, data, documents, site visits, potential federal and state records requests). Keep your question in mind as you report to avoid wasting time going down blind alleys. If you feel like you’re spinning your wheels, step back and reevaluate your assumptions. Talk to trusted sources for insight. Sometimes a story changes course. Go with the flow—you might happen upon an even better story.

Identify a minimum & maximum story

What if your big investigative question doesn’t pan out? Think of “minimum” stories to fall back on. Come up with at least one minimum story in case you don’t get the documents or sources you think are crucial for the bigger investigation.

Figure out what resources and materials you’ll need for your minimum stories. Think about what it would take for you to be ready to publish. As you do your reporting, write the nuts and bolts of your material supports. Keep writing nuts and supporting paragraphs, until you feel you’ve proven your hypothesis. Remember, sometimes investigative stories raise questions about whether something has failed, rather than proving it. (For example, several patients died at a hospital. If you can’t prove negligence, can you show that safeguards could have been put in place that could have avoided the deaths?)

Stay on track by organizing as you go

It’s easy to get overwhelmed by the sheer volume of material in an investigative story. Come up with a reporting plan and keep a reporting diary, eg, using a spreadsheet or whiteboard to track

what you need to do and what you've done as you go: track records requests (date of filing, follow up, status, etc.), log documents and data obtained (and source), data analysis steps, interviews, etc. Consider creating a column with annotations for each piece of information.

Create a timeline of events to organize your material. If you're doing data analysis, keep a data diary that includes each step in the analysis so you can replicate it and fact checkers can too. Think carefully up front about how to name and categorize information so you can easily find sources when you're ready to start writing. Write synopses of key ideas with links to your source materials.

Make sure you look for data, sources, anything that might disprove your hypothesis. Use a trusted colleague or source as a sounding board for regular reality checks to keep you on track.

Consider tobacco tactics to investigate industry influence in science

Tobacco tactics aim to suppress, confuse and condemn inconvenient science. Among the tactics industries use:

Sponsor research that supports industry interests (especially review articles) There's a wealth of studies showing that sponsored research almost always favors the sponsor's interests.

Cast doubt on research and science behind policy that threatens industry interests

Attack scientists whose results threaten industry interests and journalists who report on them.

Enlist third parties—think tanks, front groups, media allies—to spread doubt and propagate attacks through echo chambers.

Dismiss revelations about industry-funded research and undisclosed COIs as witch hunts and ad hominem.

Call for more “sound science” to delay regulations.

These tactics are always evolving. www.tobaccotactics.org, curated by academics at the University of Bath, keeps a regularly updated resource of papers and analyses of industry tactics.

Databases to track industry influence in science

Dollars for Docs, <https://projects.propublica.org/docdollars/>. Pharmaceutical and medical device companies are required by law to release details of their payments to a variety of doctors and US teaching hospitals for promotional talks, research and consulting, among other categories. This tool includes general payments (excluding research and ownership interests) made from August 2013 to December 2016.

Monsanto Papers, <https://usrtk.org/pesticides/mdl-monsanto-glyphosate-cancer-case-key-documents-analysis/>, curated by US Right to Know, a nonprofit investigative research group focused on the food industry.

Poison Papers, <https://www.poisonpapers.org/>, documenting the hidden history of chemical and pesticide hazards in the United States

UCSF Industry Documents Library <https://idl.ucsf.edu>, a portal to millions of documents created by industries that influence public health, hosted by the UCSF Library and Center for Knowledge Management. Industries covered include tobacco, drug, chemical, food, fossil fuel.